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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Thursday, November 15, 1934.

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Subject: "Nature's Dyestuffs." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

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Many old-time American home arts have been reviving during these last few years. Women in all parts of the country have been returning to the handcrafts that pioneer housewives knew so well -- returning for the sake of pleasure and profit, too. I hear that quilting parties are again in style and that many women are going in for rug making and weaving. The homely job of soap making has revived as an economy measure in many farm homes. Recently another old art has appeared on the scene -- home dyeing with native dyes.

You know, when our great-great-grandmothers wanted to color material for a dress, they couldn't run around the corner and leave the job to a dyeing and cleaning establishment. And they couldn't go and buy a package of dye at the drug store. So they turned to nature for their dyestuffs. From the Indians and from their own experiments they learned which wild roots, leaves, bark or berries would make good dyes.

At a later hard-times period in our history nature's dyes again came into use. This was during and directly after the Civil War in the South. No doubt you have heard how the ingenuity of the Southern women was taxed in those days to provide many of the necessities of life, particularly clothing. Civil War historians tell us that the old looms which had been idle almost a generation were set in motion, and the Negro women wove from daylight to dark. The stout homespun, which they produced, clothed in time almost everybody in the Confederacy from the soldier in butternut jeans to the society lady. One of these ladies appeared at a ball in Richmond wearing a dress of homespun ornamented profusely with gourd-seed buttons dyed red.

Although the ladies wore homespun with pride, they did not lose their instinct for personal adornment. They experimented constantly to obtain fast dyes. They used myrtle to give a soft gray; hickory bark a yellow. Brown was extracted from walnut hulls. The pokeberry produced a brilliant red that was popular for party dresses. Rusty nails were used to set the dye.

Well, that was long ago. Now we have good commercial dyes which cost only a few cents a package, are easier to use, and yield clearer colors than the natural dyes. But natural dyes are especially suited to handicraft work, and right now many people are making textiles by hand. For many, this kind of work has become a source of family income, so they are interested in knowing the old-fashioned ways of dyeing their fabrics to make them more interesting and saleable.

Naturally, such workers want to know which of nature's dyestuffs will give attractive colors and also be fast to light and washing. In fact, so many of these inquiries came to the Bureau of Home Economics at Washington, that Miss Margaret Furry, the dye and stain expert, set out last year to make an investigation on the subject. If you're at all interested in home crafts, I'm sure you'll like to hear a few of the things she found out.

She discovered in the first place that though the fields and woods are full of plants that will color fabrics, comparatively few of them will give good fast colors. And the color you get at one season of year from some of them probably won't be the same that you get at another season. You can't count on nature's dyestuffs as you can the synthetic dyes chemically manufactured that you can buy. The fast colors that are easiest to get from nature are the tans, browns and yellows. The most difficult are the blues, purples, lavenders, and reds. In fact, Miss Furry only lists indigo as a material to give pure blue, and this is imported, not a native dye. As for shades of red and purple, she has found that only madder and cochineal are satisfactory and both these are also products of other countries.

But if you want brown shades, you have a wide choice of materials, free for gathering. For example, the bark of many of our common trees makes good brown dye. Miss Furry says fall is the time to gather the bark of all but the resinous trees, which happen to give a better color in spring. She also says that most bark gives a deeper dye when it is fresh than when it is dried, but that you can get good fast colors on wool with many different kinds of dried bark. By the way, probably you know that the so-called animal fibers -- wool and pure silk, take most dyes more easily than cotton and linen. In the case of dyes made from bark, you can produce almost any fast color of brown that you want on wool -- anything from light tan to deep dark brown, but barks won't dye cotton satisfactorily at all.

Well, some of the barks that you can gather this fall for dyeing wools are apple, birch, sweet gum, hickory, Norway maple, oak, walnut and willow. Either use them fresh or dry them well and store them in a dry place so they won't mould. You can also get beautiful brown shades from black walnut, pecan, and butternut hulls. And you can get a nice khaki color from juniper berries.

As for yellow, that's another color not hard to get from the growing things around you. For example, sedge grass gives a good clear yellow. And the brown dry outer skin of an onion and the flowers of yellow dahlias will dye wool a fast shade of dull orange. Oak bark, privet leaves and tulip leaves will give a gold color. And apple bark, goldenrod and marigold flowers will dye your wool fabrics a brass shade.

Well, that's only a beginning of what Miss Furry can tell you about nature's dyes. We'll talk about this again some day. In the meantime, if you're interested in further information, you can write the Bureau of Home Economics, at Washington, D. C.

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